Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists

Volume 18
Number 1 *Volume 18-19*

Article 6

January 2000

Archives in the New Germany: Research Reflections on a System in Transition

Russel Lemmons
Jacksonville State University

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The sudden collapse of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany or the GDR) and the resulting reunification of Germany—what the Germans call *die Wende* (the turning)—changed many German institutions forever. The German economy, for example, experienced a downturn, the result of which was double-digit unemployment for the first time since the Weimar Republic. Governmental institutions, most notably in education, experienced a dramatic metamorphosis in the *neue Länder* (new states). Among the most important but largely unnoticed changes taking place, however, are those in the federal archives system.[1] These modifications have had a significant effect on scholars.

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[1] For an excellent survey of the history of the German federal archives system, see Friedrich P. Kahlenberg, "Democracy and Federalism: Changes in the National Archival System in a United Germany," *American Archivist* 55 (winter 1992): 72–85.

In keeping with their often well-deserved reputation for efficiency, the Germans are carrying out a massive reorganization and rationalization of their much-lauded federal archives system. Just as two Germanies became one, when the west effectively annexed the east, two systems of national archives are being united—and not without a certain amount of friction.[2] Nowhere are history and its artifacts more controversial than in Germany, and the process of changing the location and guardianship of modern Germany's historical record has been fraught with potential for conflict. Fortunately, the archives' reunification has followed the pattern of the nation's—a few problems here and there but overall a tremendous success.

The fate of one collection, possibly the largest in the GDR, became the focus of tremendous tension during the reunification process. With the collapse of East Germany's governing Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland,* or SED) in 1990, citizens of the GDR became increasingly concerned about the fate of the repository of the State Security Service, or *Stasi.* The *Stasi* had around one hundred thousand full-time agents as well as hundreds of thousands of *inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (IMs or "unofficial collaborators"). This secretive police agency amassed files on approximately four million East Germans as well as two million westerners, many of whom had resided in the country at one time. Housed in the *Stasi* headquarters in East Berlin, the files occupied around 180 kilometers of shelf space. Laid end to end the records would extend from the earth to the moon.[3] In response to rumors

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[2] Regarding the law (the *Bundesarchivgesetz*) putting these changes into effect, see "Bundesarchiv–Novelle in Kraft," *German Studies Association Newsletter* 17 (winter 1992): 47–49.

[3] Peter E. Quint, *The Imperfect Union: Constitutional Structures of German Unification* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 229, 232.

that the *Stasi* planned to destroy these archives to cover up the crimes of the SED, Berliners took action.

On 15 January 1990, a mob stormed *Stasi* headquarters on Normannenstrasse and seized control of these politically sensitive documents.[4] Although many West Germans wanted to destroy or seal the records, the reunification treaty created a commission under the leadership of Joachim Gauck to oversee the files. Gauck previously had served as chairman of the East German parliament's committee on the *Stasi*. The Federal Authority for the Records of the State Security Service of the Former GDR, known as the Gauck Authority, employed over three thousand people in 1997 and manages the collection. Under the *Stasi* Records Law, citizens of the *neue Länder* are permitted access to their individual files. Opening the previously secret files has led to numerous embarrassing revelations, among them the fact that the GDR's most influential literary figure, Christa Wolf, was a longtime informant for the secret police.[5] Many marriages have ended in divorce after disclosures that spouses were spying on each other. Hundreds if not thousands of German families have been torn apart by the contents of these archives, and long-term friendships have ended.[6] Because of Germany's very strict privacy laws,

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[4] Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), 164.

[5] Quint, *Imperfect Union*, 234–39.

[6] Quint, *Imperfect Union*, 234–35. Several written accounts by non-Germans about the content of their dossiers have appeared. The most interesting is Timothy Garton Ash's *The File: A Personal History* (New York: Random House, 1997). Ash was an English graduate student doing research in the GDR in the late 1970s and early 1980s. When he confronted some of those who had informed on him, their response was typically, "I am not responsible. I was only following orders."

however, access to the *Stasi* archives remains challenging for scholars.

Another set of records opened in the wake of *die Wende* has been a boon to researchers. This is the *Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der ehemaligen DDR im Bundesarchiv* (Institution Archive of the Parties and Mass Organizations of the former GDR in the Federal Archives). Called simply SAPMO-BA by scholars, for obvious reasons, it contains the records of the SED and its numerous puppet political organizations. Located in a massive military installation in Berlin Lichterfelde that once belonged to the German and then American armies, it combines the holdings of the SED's Central Party Archives, previously located on Berlin's Wilhelm Pieck Straße, with other holdings on German communism. The SAPMO-BA is a veritable treasure trove for scholars interested in the history of the German far left. It holds not only documents from the GDR but also many from the pre-war and interwar years. Because the records relate to official matters, privacy laws do not apply to the vast majority of them, and most are easily accessible to researchers. One can read the minutes of Politbüro and Central Committee meetings, not to mention the personal papers of many GDR leaders and bureaucrats. In addition, the SAPMO-BA has a library of thousands of books and periodicals published by and about the German left. These holdings contain the primary source materials for thousands of dissertations and scholarly articles and books. Historians have only begun to tap the wealth of sources in this truly important archives.

Repositories that were already part of the federal system have been dramatically affected by the reorganization process as well. The Federal Archives at Koblenz, the repository of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, or West Germany), is receiving materials on the Weimar and Federal Republics that were previously held by the former East German Central Archives in Potsdam. Other Potsdam holdings on the GDR period are going to the SAPMO-BA. The

GDR's military records will move to the charming university town of Freiburg, where the central military archives of the Federal Republic is located. The Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv at Fehrbelinner Platz 3 in Berlin will house the combined film collections of the federal archives system.[7]

The United States State Department transferred control of the Berlin Document Center (BDC), a repository housing the largest collection anywhere of documents from the National Socialist period, to the control of the German Federal Archives in 1994. Anyone who did research there will remember the disorganized piles of papers strewn haphazardly on shelves, tables, and floors. The State Department had in mind the prosecution of war criminals, not academic study by scholars, when assembling the collection for use in the Nuremburg trials. It is no small wonder that an unknown number of documents was stolen in the mid-1980s and sold to collectors of Nazi memorabilia. In response, Dr. David Marwell, the BDC's last American director, began the process of upgrading the technology available in the reading room. The Germans will undoubtedly continue with security improvements and begin indexing the collection, which was never a high priority under American administration. This would make the BDC a more pleasant and efficient place to work, but the new custody arrangement does have its drawbacks.

As historians Henry Friedlander, Gerhard Weinberg, and Geoffrey Giles pointed out in 1993, handing over the

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[7] Erwin K. Welsch, Jürgen Danyel, and Thomas D. Kilton, *Archives and Libraries in a New Germany* (New York: Council for European Studies, 1994), 1–26. The repository in Potsdam was subsequently closed. A word of advice for scholars hoping to use the Film Archives: Plan well in advance because it can take weeks to schedule the showing of a film.

archives to the Germans would make it subject to Germany's very strict privacy laws.[8] The prospect of decreased access for scholars prompted an outcry by specialists in German history. The Germans promised microfilm copies of the documents, but scholars considered continued access to the original documents essential. Pressure placed on the U.S. government led to a House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee hearing in April 1994 at which both Giles and Friedlander testified. The result was an oral promise from Chancellor Helmut Kohl assuring that access would not be restricted.[9]

Despite this massive transition in custody and organization of repositories, many archives in the former East Germany will remain largely unchanged. These include the archives of the GDR's Academy of Arts as well as the vast majority of regional and local collections.

By 1996, when I visited German archives in the former GDR for the first time, the reorganization process was well underway, and it did cause some inconvenience. The *Bundesarchiv-Potsdam*, for example, did not have adequate facilities to accommodate all of the scholars who had flocked there since *die Wende*. Because very few people were granted access to the archives during the GDR years, its reading room was extremely small. Seats were difficult to find. The repository was understaffed, but its overworked personnel did a remarkable job of keeping up with requests.

It was at Potsdam, however, that I encountered my single significant problem gaining access to needed records. I wanted to look at some papers pertaining to the construc-

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[8] See "German Studies Association Archives Committee Annual Report," *German Studies Association Newsletter* 18 (winter 1993): 42–43.

[9] Welsch, Danyel, and Kilton, *Archives and Libraries in a New Germany*, 143. On the controversy surrounding this decision, see Gerald Posner, "Secrets of the Files," *New Yorker* (14 March 1994): 39–47, and "Archives Report and the Berlin Document Center," *German Studies Association Newsletter* 19 (winter 1994): 31–49.

tion of monuments and memorials in the GDR. These are held in the records of the GDR's Ministry of the Interior, which were being transferred to the SAPMO-BA. According to the archivist, the collection was no longer in Potsdam. Then I discovered, through contact with an archivist at the SAPMO-BA, that the records were there but not yet available to researchers.

This incident was atypical, however. Visiting archives in the *neue Länder* was an overwhelmingly positive experience. Americans remained something of a novelty to eastern Germans, and they still liked us—the same often cannot be said about western Germans. The vast majority of archivists were courteous, friendly, and forthcoming. For example, when I visited the Buchenwald Archives outside Weimar, the chief archivist, Frau Sabine Stein, took me on a personal tour of the camp and even permitted me to visit a national memorial from the GDR period that had been closed for several years. She also related some of her fascinating experiences growing up in East Germany. At that time, I was the only researcher working at the East German Academy of Arts, and I had four archivists at my service, each of whom made an effort to save me money on photocopying whenever possible. When I visited the Thuringian State Archives in Weimar, several other scholars were working there, all Germans, but the chief archivist lavished me with attention, regaling me with stories about growing up in Weimar. He was extremely pleased to discover that an American took GDR culture seriously, and he identified collections that I might otherwise have overlooked. All of the archivists that I encountered were knowledgeable about the collections they oversaw and were well prepared to aid researchers. It was a joy to work with them.

On balance it is clear that the changes taking place in Germany's archives system will be overwhelmingly positive for scholars. They have access to collections that have been closed to them for over fifty years. The archives are being reorganized along the lines of the principle of prov-

enance, which should make the entire system more rational and user friendly. These changes will also reduce travel time and expense because a researcher might only have to visit a single location to complete his or her work. For the most part, courteous professionals, who clearly belie the stereotype of machine-like efficiency so often associated with German bureaucrats, staff the archives. They are also indexing collections and will soon issue guidebooks. A few years of minor inconvenience for researchers is a small price to pay for what will be gained.

Russel Lemmons is associate professor of history in the Department of History and Foreign Languages at Jacksonville State University, Alabama. This article is based on a paper presented at an annual meeting of the Alabama Historical Association in 1999.